
NUMBERS 31:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

The command of the Lord to make war on the Midianites, Num 31:1, Num 31:2. One thousand men are chosen out of each of the twelve tribes, and sent with Phinehas against the Midianites, Num 31:3-6. They slay all the males, Num 31:7; their five kings and Balaam, Num 31:8. They take all the women captives, with the flocks and goods, Num 31:9; burn their cities, and bring away the spoil, Num 31:10, Num 31:11. They bring the captives, etc., to Moses, who is wroth with the officers for sparing the women, who had formerly been the cause of their transgression and punishment, Num 31:12-16. He commands all the male children and all the grown up females to be slain, Num 31:17, Num 31:18. How the soldiers were to purify themselves, Num 31:19, Num 31:20; and the different articles taken in war, Num 31:21-24. They are commanded to take the sum of the prey, to divide it into two parts; one for the 12,000 warriors, and the other for the rest of the congregation, Num 31:25-27. One of 500, both of persons and cattle, of the share of the warriors, to be given to the Lord, Num 31:28, Num 31:29; and one part of fifty, of the people's share, to be given to the Levites, Num 31:30. The sum of the prey remaining after the above division; sheep 675,000, beeves 72,000, asses 61,000, young women 32,000, Num 31:31-35. How the soldiers' part was divided, Num 31:36-40. How the part belonging to the congregation was divided, Num 31:41-47. The officers report that they had not lost a man in this war, Num 31:48, Num 31:49. They bring a voluntary oblation to God, of gold and ornaments, Num 31:50, Num 31:51; the amount of which was 16,750 shekels, Num 31:52, Num 31:53. Moses and Eleazar bring the gold into the tabernacle for a memorial, Num 31:54.

NUMBERS 31:2 "Avenge the children of Israel for the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people."

Verse 2

Gathered unto thy people - Where? Not in the grave surely. Moses was gathered with none of them, his burial-place no man ever knew. "But being gathered unto one's people means dying." It does imply dying, but it does not mean this only. The truth is, God considers all those who are dead to men in a state of conscious existence in another world. Therefore he calls himself the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob; now God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; because all Live to Him, whether dead to men or not. Moses therefore was to be gathered to his people - to enter into that republic of Israel which, having died in the faith, fear, and love of God, were now living in a state of conscious blessedness beyond the confines of the grave. See the note on Gen 25:8, and Gen 49:33 (note).

NUMBERS 31:3 Moses spoke to the people, saying, "Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian, to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian."

Verse 3

Avenge the Lord of Midian - It was God's quarrel, not their own, that they were now to take up. These people were idolaters; idolatry is an offense against God; the civil power has no authority to meddle with what belongs to Him, without especial directions, certified in the most unequivocal way. Private revenge, extension of territory, love of plunder, were to have no place in this business; the Lord is to be avenged; and through Him the children of Israel, (Num 31:2), because their souls as well as their bodies had been well nigh ruined by their idolatry.

NUMBERS 31:4 Of every tribe one thousand, throughout all the tribes of Israel, you shall send to the war."

NUMBERS 31:5 So there were delivered, out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for war.

NUMBERS 31:6 Moses sent them, one thousand of every tribe, to the war, them and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand.

Verse 6

A thousand of every tribe - Twelve thousand men in the whole. And Phinehas, the son of Eleazar; some think he was made general in this expedition, but this is not likely. The ark and its contents must proceed to this battle, because the battle was the Lord's, and he dwelt between the cherubim over the ark; and Phinehas, who had before got a grant in the eternal priesthood, was chosen to accompany the ark in place of his father Eleazar, who was probably now too far advanced in years to undergo the fatigue. Who then was general? Joshua, without doubt, though not here mentioned, because the battle being the Lord's, he alone is to have the supreme direction, and all the glory. Besides, it was an extraordinary war, and not conducted on the common principle, for we do not find that peace was offered to the Midianites, and that they refused it; see Deu 20:10, etc. In such a case only hostilities could lawfully commence; but they were sinners against God; the cup of their iniquity was full, and God thought proper to destroy them. Though a leader there certainly was, and Joshua was probably that leader, yet because God, for the above reason, was considered as commander-in-chief, therefore no one else is mentioned; for it is evident that the sole business of Phinehas was to take care of the holy instruments and to blow with the trumpet.

NUMBERS 31:7 They fought against Midian, as the LORD commanded Moses. They killed every male.

NUMBERS 31:8 They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. They also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.

Verse 8

Balaam - they slew with the sword - This man had probably committed what St. John calls the sin unto death - a sin which God punishes with temporal death, while at the same time he extends mercy to the soul. See the remarks at Num 24:25 (note).

NUMBERS 31:9 The children of Israel took the women of Midian captive with their little ones; and all their livestock, all their flocks, and all their goods, they took as plunder.

NUMBERS 31:10 All their cities in the places in which they lived, and all their encampments, they burnt with fire.

NUMBERS 31:11 They took all the captives, and all the plunder, both of man and of animal.

NUMBERS 31:12 They brought the captives, and the prey, and the plunder, to Moses, and to Eleazar the priest, and to the congregation of the children of Israel, to the camp at the plains of Moab, which are by the Jordan at Jericho.

NUMBERS 31:13 Moses, and Eleazar the priest, and all the princes of the congregation, went out to meet them outside of the camp.

NUMBERS 31:14 Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds, who came from the service of the war.

NUMBERS 31:15 Moses said to them, "Have you saved all the women alive?"

NUMBERS 31:16 Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.

NUMBERS 31:17 Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him.

Verse 17

Kill every male among the little ones - For this action I account simply on the principle that God, who is the author and supporter of life, has a right to dispose of it when and how he thinks proper; and the Judge of all the earth can do nothing but what is right. Of the women killed on this occasion it may be safely said, their lives were forfeited by their personal transgressions; and yet even in this case there can be little doubt that God showed mercy to their souls. The little ones were safely lodged; they were taken to heaven and saved from the evil to come.

NUMBERS 31:18 But all the girls, who have not known man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.

NUMBERS 31:19 "Encamp outside of the camp seven days. Whoever has killed any person, and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves on the third day and on the seventh day, you and your captives.

NUMBERS 31:20 As to every garment, and all that is made of skin, and all work of goats' hair, and all things made of wood, you shall purify yourselves."

NUMBERS 31:21 Eleazar the priest said to the men of war who went to the battle, "This is the statute of the law which the LORD has commanded Moses:

NUMBERS 31:22 however the gold, and the silver, the brass, the iron, the tin, and the lead,

NUMBERS 31:23 everything that may withstand the fire, you shall make to go through the fire, and it shall be clean; nevertheless it shall be purified with the water for impurity. All that doesn't withstand the fire you shall make to go through the water.

Verse 23

The water of separation - The water in which the ashes of the red heifer were mingled; See Num 8:7 (note), Num 19:2 (note), etc. Garments, whether of cloth or skins, were to be washed. Gold, silver, brass, iron, tin, and lead, to pass through the fire, probably to be melted down.

NUMBERS 31:24 You shall wash your clothes on the seventh day, and you shall be clean. Afterward you shall come into the camp."

NUMBERS 31:25 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

NUMBERS 31:26 "Count the plunder that was taken, both of man and of animal, you, and Eleazar the priest, and the heads of the fathers' households of the congregation;

NUMBERS 31:27 and divide the plunder into two parts: between the men skilled in war, who went out to battle, and all the congregation.

NUMBERS 31:28 Levy a tribute to the LORD of the men of war who went out to battle: one soul of five hundred; of the persons, of the cattle, of the donkeys, and of the flocks.

Verse 28

And levy a tribute unto the Lord - one soul of five hundred, etc. - The person to be employed in the Lord's service, under the Levites - the cattle either for sacrifice, or for the use of the Levites, Num 31:30. Some monsters have supposed that one out of every five hundred of the captives was offered in sacrifice to the Lord! but this is abominable. When God chose to have the life of a man, he took it in the way of justice, as in the case of Midianites above, but never in the way of sacrifice.

NUMBERS 31:29 Take it from their half, and give it to Eleazar the priest, for the LORD's wave offering.

NUMBERS 31:30 Of the children of Israel's half, you shall take one drawn out of every fifty, of the persons, of the cattle, of the donkeys, and of the flocks, of all the livestock, and give them to the Levites, who perform the duty of the LORD's tabernacle."

NUMBERS 31:31 Moses and Eleazar the priest did as the LORD commanded Moses.

NUMBERS 31:32 Now the plunder, over and above the booty which the men of war took, was six hundred seventy-five thousand sheep,

Verse 32

The booty - It appears from the enumeration here that the Israelites, in this war against the Midianites, took 32,000 female prisoners, 61,000 asses, 72,000 beeves, 675,000 sheep and small cattle; besides the immense number of males who fell in battle, and the women and children who were slain by the Divine command, Num 31:17. And it does not appear that in this expedition, a single man of Israel fell! This was naturally to be expected, because the battle was the Lord's, Num 31:49.

As the booty was divided into two equal parts, Num 31:22, one for the soldiers employed in the expedition, and the other for those who, being equally willing to be employed, were ordered to stay in the camp; so each of the parties in this booty was to give a certain proportion to the Lord. The soldiers to give to the Lord one out of every five hundred persons, beeves, asses, and sheep, Num 31:28. The people, who by staying at home risked nothing, and had no fatigue, were to give one out of fifty of the above, Num 31:30. The booty, its divisions among the soldiers and people, the proportion given by each to the Lord and to the Levites, will be seen in one view by the following table, which I copy from Houbigant.

Total of sheep - 675,000

To the soldiers - 337,500

To the Lord from the soldiers - 675

To the people - 337,500

To the Levites from the people - 6,750

Total of beeves - 72,000

To the soldiers - 36,000

To the Lord from the soldiers - 72

To the people - 36,000

To the Levites from the people - 720

Total of asses - 1,000

To the soldiers - 30,500

To the Lord from the soldiers - 61

To the people - 30,500

To the Levites from the people - 610

Total of persons - 32,000

To the soldiers.. 16,000

To the Lord from the soldiers - 32

To the Levites from the people - 320

To the people - 16,000

In this table the booty is equally divided between the people and the soldiers; a five-hundredth part being given to the Lord, and a fiftieth part to the Levites.

NUMBERS 31:33 and seventy-two thousand head of cattle,

NUMBERS 31:34 and sixty-one thousand donkeys,

NUMBERS 31:35 and thirty-two thousand persons in all, of the women who had not known man by lying with him.

NUMBERS 31:36 The half, which was the portion of those who went out to war, was in number three hundred thirty-seven thousand five hundred sheep:

NUMBERS 31:37 and the LORD's tribute of the sheep was six hundred seventy-five.

NUMBERS 31:38 The cattle were thirty-six thousand; of which the LORD's tribute was seventy-two.

NUMBERS 31:39 The donkeys were thirty thousand five hundred; of which the LORD's tribute was sixty-one.

NUMBERS 31:40 The persons were sixteen thousand; of whom the LORD's tribute was thirty-two persons.

NUMBERS 31:41 Moses gave the tribute, which was the LORD's wave offering, to Eleazar the priest, as the LORD commanded Moses.

NUMBERS 31:42 Of the children of Israel's half, which Moses divided off from the men who fought

NUMBERS 31:43 (now the congregation's half was three hundred thirty-seven thousand five hundred sheep,

NUMBERS 31:44 and thirty-six thousand head of cattle,

NUMBERS 31:45 and thirty thousand five hundred donkeys,

NUMBERS 31:46 and sixteen thousand persons),

NUMBERS 31:47 even of the children of Israel's half, Moses took one drawn out of every fifty, both of man and of animal, and gave them to the Levites, who performed the duty of the LORD's tabernacle; as the LORD commanded Moses.

NUMBERS 31:48 The officers who were over the thousands of the army, the captains of thousands, and the captains of hundreds, came near to Moses.

NUMBERS 31:49 They said to Moses, "Your servants have taken the sum of the men of war who are under our command, and there lacks not one man of us.

NUMBERS 31:50 We have brought the LORD's offering, what every man has gotten, of jewels of gold, armlets, and bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and necklaces, to make atonement for our souls before the LORD."

Verse 50

We have - brought an oblation for the Lord - So it appears there was a great deal of booty taken which did not come into the general account; and of this the soldiers, of their own will, made a very extensive offering to God, because he had preserved them from falling in battle. That not one man

should have been slain is a most extraordinary circumstance, and powerfully marks the peculiar superintendence of God's especial providence. The Midianites must certainly have made some resistance; but that was ineffectual, because it was against the Lord. When any nation undertakes a crusade against those whom they are pleased to call the Lord's enemies, let them bring from the contest this proof of their Divine mission, viz., that not one man of them is either lost or missing; and then, and not till then, shall we believe that God hath sent them.

To make an atonement for our souls - That is, to make an acknowledgment to God for the preservation of their lives. The gold offered on this occasion amounted to 16,750 shekels, equal to 37,869, 16s. 5d. of our money. See the note on Exo 25:39, where the true value of the shekel is given, and a rule laid down to reduce it to English money.

NUMBERS 31:51 Moses and Eleazar the priest took their gold, even all worked jewels.

NUMBERS 31:52 All the gold of the wave offering that they offered up to the LORD, of the captains of thousands, and of the captains of hundreds, was sixteen thousand seven hundred fifty shekels.

NUMBERS 31:53 The men of war had taken booty, every man for himself.

NUMBERS 31:54 Moses and Eleazar the priest took the gold of the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it into the Tent of Meeting, for a memorial for the children of Israel before the LORD.
